

by Bob Saydlowski, Jr.

A Look at Drumheads

The shell material of a drum is responsible for a lot of the general sound, but the main sound generator is the drumhead. Drummers once used calfskin heads which yielded a warm, mellow tone (in fact, some still do use calfskin). But a major problem with these heads was that they constantly had to be re-tuned due to changes in temperature and humidity. The revolutionary design of the plastic drumhead gradually reduced the production of calfskin heads, though many players were reluctant to change.

Currently, a drummer has over 80 different types and weights of drumheads to choose from, made by nine different manufacturers. Calfskin is still available from a few companies, but today, the plastic drumhead reigns.

Plastic heads are virtually unaffected by weather conditions, and combining different types and weights naturally results in a wide choice of sounds. Generally, a coated head has the shortest duration of sound, longer with a smooth-white, and even longer with a transparent head. Weights range from extra-thin to thin (very sensitive), medium (all-purpose), up to the two-ply weight (effective in certain rock situations and studio, as well as on marching drums).

Of all the manufacturers, Remo (currently celebrating their 25th anniversary) is by far the largest. Remo heads are found as stock items on almost all the major drum lines, as well as on student and semi-pro drums. At present, they make ten different types: coated, smooth-white, transparent, snare side, *C.S.*, *coated C.S.*, *Pinstripe*, *C.S. Pinstripe*, *FiberSkyn 2*, and *Soundmaster*. Four different weights are available for some of the heads, making for quite a large selection.

Remo's coated heads are sprayed with a rough white surface, ideal for brush playing. The *Ambassador* head is the most popular. After awhile, the coating

will wear off, and it is at this point that the head should be replaced.

The transparents have been making their way into wide use as resonating (bottom) heads on tom-toms, as well as batter heads.

Controlled Sound (CS) heads have a circular black patch laminated to the batter side. The patch adds half the thickness of the head at the point of impact. Available in white or clear, with white, black or clear dots, the CS heads are designed to control unwanted overtones and ring. A special 14" coated CS head allows brush playing with the benefits of the reduced overtones, using the dot patch on the underside of the head.

Remo's *Pinstripe* head has two layers of transparent heavy *Emperor-weight* Mylar bonded together at the collar with a special coating applied at the bond. *Pinstripes* offer a controlled muffle that goes beyond the CS heads. Effective in studio work, the *Pinstripe* head eliminates the need for felt or tape on the drumhead in order to get a wet, flat sound. *Pinstripes* are sometimes mistaken for oil-filled heads because of a rainbow pattern that appears in the head surface. However, the head is not filled with any sort of liquid. The rainbow-colored patterns, called Newton Rings, are caused by light bending while passing through the layers of film. *CS Pinstripe* heads are available in 14" and 15": a *Pinstripe* head with a CS dot patch applied (primarily for marching use).

A few years back, Remo produced the *FiberSkyn* head—a combination of plastic and fiberglass fabric, which approached the tone of calfskin. These were discontinued in favor of the new *FiberSkyn 2*. *FiberSkyn 2*'s are constructed of a special new film laminated to Mylar that resembles the look of a calfskin head. They have a warm, mellow tone like natural calfskin, and hold up much better than the old calfskin heads did. *FiberSkyn 2* heads give a

deeper sound, and also control overtones to a certain point. If you want the "calfskin sound," especially with wood-shelled drums, check out the *FiberSkyn 2*.

The budget line for Remo is called *Soundmaster*. Unlike the other Remo heads with metal hoops, *Soundmasters* have epoxy hoops. Most student kits and semi-pro kits use *Soundmaster* heads to keep the price down. For the beginner, they're fine, but I personally do not recommend them for professional playing. The tone does leave something to be desired, and the white coating easily flakes off.

"High Strength" construction can be special-ordered on 14" and 15" *FiberSkyn 2*, *CS*, *Pinstripe*, and *Weatherking* lines.

Ludwig makes heads similar to the Remo line-up: coated, clear, smooth-white, snare, and their own controlled-sound head, *Silver Dot*. *Silver Dot* heads have a mirrored patch instead of a black one, but the main function is the same. Ludwig's plastic seems to be a bit heavier than Remo's, and they have a rolled metal hoop.

Evans drumheads have seamless, polyester hoops unlike the seamed Remo and Ludwig metal hoops. Evans also makes the regular thin, medium, heavy and snare side heads, but are mainly known for their two-ply *Rock* and *Hydraulic* heads. The *Hydraulics* have a filling of oil between the two plies that kills the overtones. The *Hydraulic* heads give a very flat sound which makes studio and live miking a lot easier (if that's the sound you're after). They are difficult to dent, but after excessive playing, the center will begin to cave in. Evans offers different colors: clear, blue and red for the *Hydraulics*; clear, blue, red, gold, black and chrome for their two-ply *Rock* line. They all have hoops belted with fiberglass so the head can conform to the edge of the shell.

Canasonic heads have one-piece, fi-

berglass/plastic skin with flexible hoops. They have a deeper, mellower sound than Mylar, and come in five types: *Regular*, *No-Overtone*, *Sound Dot*, *Drum Corps*, and *Snare Side*. The *No-Overtone* head has exactly the characteristic it names. Unlike Mylar, fiberglass does not stretch. Since it has a high tensile strength, it is possible to achieve the desired tension without fear of pocking the head from heavy playing. The Canasonic *Sound Dot* has the dot as an integral part of the head, since it is molded in rather than being stuck on. The *Drum Corps* head incorporates the *Sound Dot* along with an extremely heavy-duty thick weight. Canasonic heads and the *Sound Dots* come in different colors, allowing the drummer to color coordinate his entire set.

Pearl Drums in Japan has introduced *BlackBeat* heads. Available in all sizes, *BlackBeat* heads are made of black-colored medium-weight plastic. For cosmetic purposes, and as resonant heads, they're real nice, but for batter use, the *BlackBeats* are somewhat lacking in tone and strength.

Duraline is the newest on the market. "Kevlar" material is used—reportedly the same material used in bulletproof vests. Two types are available: *Concert* and *Studio*, as well as *Snare Side*. The batter heads have resin circles applied to the center for strength and tonality. The *Studio* line also has a resin ring around the collar. Duraline claims that, even if you puncture the head, you can keep on playing. But watch out when using brushes; the material is so coarse that the brush strands get caught up.

In the accessory department, companies are springing up all over, offering stick-on dot patches separately, foam rings for the underside of the head to muffle ring. Mylar donuts for the batter side, giving tone modulation and dampening.

So, take your pick! There are all sorts of combinations for double-headed drums. I can't tell you what to buy—your ears are the only ones to trust.



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